## LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN HARAMALIS

The President of the National Guard Association of California discusses the organization's recent legislative efforts, and the importance of being a member of the Association.

If you want to get something done, then ask a busy man. That old cliché certainly applies to Lieutenant Colonel John Haramalis, commander of the 95th Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team, and, most recently, President of the National Guard Association of California.

Despite his demanding schedule, Haramalis has heard the rank and file's cry for relief that will help them maintain the difficult balancing act between military obligation, civilian employment, and family commitment. More important, he has taken action to empower the soldiers' and airmen's voices before the California State Legislature.

Recently, he made time to talk with the Grizzly's Major Stan Zezotarski about the NGAC, it's challenges, and how soldiers and airmen can contribute to the success of their own cause.

**GRIZZLY**: You have initiated some sweeping changes in the National Guard Association of California, creating an avenue that allows the rank and file to choose their leaders versus an old system where each command had a block of votes. What impact has this had on NGAC?

HARAMALIS: The impact has been nothing less than dramatic. NGAC doubled its membership and we are in process of guiding a landmark education bill through the state legislature. The NGAC has become a powerful advocate for legislation that benefits California National Guard members. We plan to continue down this

GRIZZLY: You were sworn into office in March. When did the current leadership begin initiating these changes?

HARAMALIS: As far as the changes are concerned, the credit belongs to former

NGAC President, Ronald J. Campbell and his administration. He offered me a position on the Executive Council and gave me the authority to revise the bylaws. The members wanted a direct, one person, one-vote system. We revised the rules to reflect this, as well as to authorize the President more flexibility to respond to the NGAC members' desires. The NGAC members unanimously approved the bylaws at the 2002 Conference.

**GRIZZLY:** One of your first acts was to pursue state legislation that allows California National Guardsmen to attend in-state colleges free of charge. Why?

HARAMALIS: This benefit has eluded California National Guard members for the last 20 years. California is virtually the only state in the union with no education benefits for its members. This is unacceptable. The 1998 40th Infantry Division Survey clearly



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identified a state education benefit as being in the top category of benefits that California National Guardsmen wanted. We heard them, we acted, and now we intend to listen to what the rank and file want in the future and act accordingly.

**GRIZZLY:** The NGAC has a scholarship fund available. Who's eligible and how do they apply?

HARAMALIS: Anyone in the California National Guard in good standing. The scholarships are for both undergraduate and graduates. You do not need belong to the NGAC to apply. Go to www.ngac.org and download a form, fill it out, and mail it in. It's that simple.

**GRIZZLY:** It was a battle to get the education legislation through the Assembly Committees and to get a final vote on the Assembly floor. What did the NGAC leadership do to get this passed out of the Assembly?

HARAMALIS: NGAC first introduced Assembly Bill 307—the Cal Grant National Guard bill—that used existing funds to support Guard members' education at all community colleges, state universities, and the University of California. The Assembly Higher Education Committee killed AB 307.

**GRIZZLY:** That must have been very discouraging?

HARAMALIS: It was! However, we told our members that we would pursue this benefit, so we resorted to an intensive grass roots campaign that included radio interviews, full-page newspaper ads, e-mails, and alliances with veterans groups to overcome this initial opposition. A new bill, AB 547, gave Guard, State Military Reserve, and the Naval Militia members a 100% tuition and fee waiver at all community colleges and state universities, and a 75% tuition and fee waiver at the University of California system. It also protects Guard members if they deploy in the middle of a semester, allowing refunds and academic leave. AB 547 cleared two committees and passed the full Assembly by a historic 76-0 vote. **GRIZZLY:** What battles lie ahead?

HARAMALIS: We anticipate a State Senate fight. A key Senate staff member recently told us that the bill will "never make it out of committee." We will do everything in our power to see that it does. We intend to place this bill on the Governor's desk this year, no matter what it takes. We owe that to our members who have patiently waited for this benefit

**GRIZZLY:** By fighting this battle, the NGAC has proven its credibility to California's



soldiers and airmen. What is the rank and file's responsibility for empowering NGAC's voice?

HARAMALIS: Join NGAC! We are an organization of members. Our dues are very affordable. The NGAC is the soldiers' and airmen's dedicated advocate before state and federal elected bodies. We need as many people as possible to amplify our collective voice. The greater the number, the more power we as an organization have. For an application, go to www.ngac.org.

GRIZZLY: The NGAC is planning to update the 40th Infantry Division's 1998 survey. What do you want to learn from this survey? HARAMALIS: We want to hear from the rank and file. We want to know what they believe makes the Guard a better organization and what benefits they need. We want their feedback so that we can develop a federal and state plan that reflects their needs and impacts their ability to remain in the California National Guard.

**GRIZZLY:** What are the NGAC's future legislative goals?

HARAMALIS: NGAC is currently working federal legislative issues, such as early federal retirement for M-day personnel, and Tricare for reservists. We plan to expand our legislative program at the state and federal levels by hiring a full-time legislative representative. The legislative priorities will reflect our members' desires. GRIZZLY: How to you plan to empower the NGAC at the National Level?

**HARAMALIS:** By increasing our membership. Power at the national level is reflected by

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the number of state officers who pay their National Guard Association of the United States' dues. California should be one of the most, if not the most, powerful National Guard associations in the United States. Every officer should be leading the way, joining us, to collectively acquire the benefits that will make the rank and file's job easier, keep their families intact, and encourage them to remain in the best National Guard in the nation. We are working on that.

**GRIZZLY**: In what way?

HARAMALIS: Tactically, we are organizing a lobbying team in Washington D.C. to work with the California Congressional Delegation on soldier and airmen issues.

**GRIZZLY:** What other NGAC programs and services are available to its members?

HARAMALIS: An excellent and competitive Life Insurance Program through New York Life. We are improving our dental and vision care programs. We offer scholarships, and we are currently working on providing a major medical insurance plan, our own VISA credit card, credit union membership, Costco membership, and discounts on other valuable services.

**GRIZZLY:** We want to thank you for finding time for this interview.

HARAMALIS: Thank you for the opportunity to get the NGAC messages out to our soldiers and airmen. I also want to thank the California National Guard's leadership, specifically The Adjutant General, Major General Paul D. Monroe, Jr., for their outstanding support and guidance.